

Managing the Records of the World's Greatest City

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MANY of you may have heard that New York City's annual budget totals over two billion dollars. But what you may not know is that the city's records management program costs only \$73,000 a year. Just a drop in the bucket! But how we put our house in order, how we established what is considered one of the country's most efficiently operated records programs, is what you really want to know. It has been my good fortune to participate in New York City's program since its inception, so you might say that you are getting the facts from the horse's mouth!

I recall that as far back as 1926 some of our city officials were trying to do something about New York City's records, especially the older papers. At that time we became aware of the fact that all city departments had custody and maintenance of records. Records were everybody's business but nobody's business, and that can be frustrating. But the frustration continued until December 1939, when the mayor appointed the Mayor's Municipal Archives Committee to solve a most pressing records problem. This committee, which is still in existence, lost no time in going to work. In the spring of 1940 — about five months after its establishment — it reported to the Mayor its findings and recommendations:

1. In 15 municipal office buildings in the five boroughs of the city, with a total space of two and a half million square feet, a half million square feet was occupied by files and records, plus a total of 130,000 sq. ft. of space in separate rooms set aside entirely for old records. Had the 130,000 sq. ft. of space been rented space, it would have cost the city approximately \$400,000 a year.
2. The city's archives had been accumulating for 300 years and unless they should be soon centralized for preservation, New York City would be without a history of its past.

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3. Records were being stored in attics and basements, in pier heads of bridges, storage bins at piers, and other dark and damp corners — all bulging with valuable historical records intermixed with the obsolete and useless. The Committee counted 2,187 depositories of records throughout the city.
4. The method used for the disposal of obsolete and useless records was not only wasteful but dangerous. The committee recommended that, in addition to the approval of the Corporation Counsel from the legal point of view, the destruction of records should also be approved by the chairman of the Mayor's Municipal Archives Committee from the historical point of view; furthermore, that records approved for disposal should be sold to authorized wastepaper dealers and no longer sent to the incinerators.

These two recommendations were adopted and are still operative. In the first four years — 1942 through 1945 — a total of 4,592 tons of paper was sold to paper dealers and the city was richer by over \$100,000.

5. The committee recommended the establishment of a centralized municipal archives and records center, where the historical papers could be preserved and the inactive records of city agencies could be stored.

This recommendation was immediately adopted. The present building was leased in 1941 and purchased in 1943. It has a capacity of 5 million cu. ft. and a floor load of 350 lbs. per sq. ft.

The war, manpower shortages, and lack of equipment made it impossible for the city to put into effect the program the Mayor's Committee outlined in its report. The chairman was authorized to approve all departmental requests for space in the new building for the storage of inactive records. The agencies assumed responsibility for the storage and servicing of such records within their assigned space.

This semi-active records program continued until January 1948 when the mayor reactivated the committee. His main reason was that all space in the archives building was filled and the city would be faced soon with the problem of finding still more space. In February 1948 the mayor issued an executive order at the committee's request, ordering each city agency to appoint a records officer and to put into effect a records management program with the help of the Mayor's Committee.

All departments responded to the mayor's executive order, and the records officers worked closely with the Mayor's Committee. In all fairness they truly worked diligently and tried to cope with the problem. They disposed of stored records, reevaluated office

records, transferred inactive records — all on a part-time basis. As we all know, however, records management is not a part-time operation. The Mayor's Committee was all too familiar with this fact. It managed to persuade the mayor to appoint a staff to begin handling the city's archives, which already were occupying considerable space in the archives building. This staff of seven was appointed in March 1950. While working on the historical papers the committee was busy convincing the Mayor's Management Survey Committee that it needed among its magnificent studies one on records management. For this it recommended a pilot project to study five agencies: the offices of the Borough President of Manhattan, Civil Service, Public Works, Purchase, and Water Supply, Gas and Electricity. A six-month study was accordingly approved and contracted for; it began in January 1951 and ended in July of the same year. The archival staff worked closely with the consultants, and when the contract ended in July our staff took over and continued the study in the rest of the city departments.

Just five weeks after the records management study got under way, it was apparent that a records center was necessary. Funds were approved by the city in February 1951, and at the end of March an area of 9,200 sq. ft. was equipped and began to receive records. By the end of September 1951 it became evident to me that the original 9,200 sq. ft. of space would not be sufficient to house the records scheduled to come to the center. A request for additional funds was made to the city, and in December 1951 funds were approved to equip an area of 15,000 sq. ft. In February 1952 we were loading the newly acquired space with inactive records.

I have attempted to take you step by step from the beginning to a point where the efforts of the committee began to bear fruit. Now I wish to bring you up to date and show why we came to have the flourishing records management program that we now have. From 1950 to now, almost a decade has passed. We are storing today over 100,000 cu. ft. of records in the records center, with established retention periods; in the archives we have about 20,000 cubic feet of original papers dating back to the seventeenth century. From a staff of 7 we have grown to 17. That figure will soon be increased, for a request pending before the budget director is expected to be approved. Instead of the original 9,200 sq. ft. of space we now man an area of over 90,000 sq. ft. Additional space can be requisitioned as needed. Even though the building was purchased for the purpose of storing records, we have cleared out many obsolete records and have released the space for other important city func-

tions. We are now confining our operations to one-third of the building's entire area.

I don't have to tell you how important it is to keep statistics. With us in New York City it has been the only means to enable us to justify our requests for funds to expand the program. The expansion of our staff did not come about overnight. In 1951 we had a reference workload of 3,000 and only the five pilot departments were storing records. Today we have a reference workload of 70,000 and we store the inactive records of 47 city agencies, with others planning to participate.

In order to help city departments to fix more realistic retention periods for their records we have been keeping statistics on the number of times they have requested specific records. Each year we give them tabulated lists showing exactly what records they requested in the past year and the number of times they called for them. This practice has worked out well and has proved to be worth the effort. Records officers have found that these tabulations are excellent guides for revising their schedules.

Most people are interested in knowing not only what has been done but how it has been done, and I believe that you would like to know how we did things in New York City. To get the records program going under full steam, the Mayor's Committee established the Co-ordinating Committee for the Records Management Program. This operating arm of the Mayor's Committee handled such matters as training records officers, helping departments to get their program under way, and offering any other assistance necessary to establish an effective records management program on a city-wide basis. The training of records officers was an eight weeks' course, two hours a week. When the training ended the Mayor's Committee prepared certificates, which were signed by the mayor and distributed by him to the records officers at a ceremony in his office, in the presence of all the city commissioners. This ceremony helped to emphasize further the fact that the city fully supported the records program, with the city's chief executive leading it. I don't see how we or any other municipality could come out with less than a successful records program with such support from top management.

The storing of inactive records and the disposal of obsolete and useless records are but a part of our work. In order to establish lasting contacts with agencies and gain their confidence, we must give good reference service. I believe our success thus far results from our superlative reference service. We deliver requested rec-

ords daily to city departments. Records are supplied in a few hours or in emergency cases a few minutes.

We redesigned our records center carton in 1952, for the carton recommended to us in 1951 had several disadvantages. It was too expensive, and two men were needed to collapse it for storage when emptied. Our new carton costs us half the price of the first one, it definitely keeps dust out, it is easier to handle in shelving, and it can be assembled and collapsed by one person. Anyone interested in our carton may write me; I will have our supplier send a sample. Our arrangements for storing the cartons on shelves in the records center are not original or novel. All that one may see on visiting our center is row after row of shelves with boxes, each box numbered. Should an unauthorized or even an authorized person wander in, he could not find any desired record — unless, of course, he should have access to the control cards, which are in reality the finding aids for our stored records. On the control card, 4 x 6 inches, we place the name of the department, bureau, or division; the name of the record; the year; the range or filing arrangement; the box number; and, of course, the retention period. The Kardex file that houses these control cards is the magic eye or nerve center; without it the reference service could not function. Needless to say, this file is locked after hours and is open only to authorized personnel. It enables our analysts to prepare their annual transfer and disposal schedules, which we submit to every agency regularly.

Of course all has not been a bed of roses. We have come across some recalcitrant agencies that felt they did not need our help. We solved that problem by just by-passing them — and soon they wanted to get into the act. Another control that the city has settled upon, and one which I feel certain is effective, is that our budget director is reluctant to grant funds for filing equipment. In fact he has gone so far as to issue a directive to all department heads urging them to transfer more records to the records center and to cut down on retention schedules whenever possible in order to release equipment for their current work. No funds were allocated for filing equipment in the current expense budget. This directive has brought us new business and new customers. When we transfer records from office areas to the records center our analyst jots down on his transfer sheet the number of pieces of equipment released. The reuse value of equipment released through such transfers amounts to about as much as the city expends in operating our entire program.

In our municipal archives we have the following: